

Helen Stiles Chenoweth

by Ty Hadman

Helen Chenoweth was a master when it came to rhythm in haiku. Her haiku dance on the page! I once had the very good fortune of meeting her at her home in Los Altos, along with Edna Purviance and Betty Drevnoik. She was in the final years of her life, but how lucid and charming she was! Whenever she recited a haiku, she counted syllables on the gnarled fingers of her elderly hands. I studied those fingers carefully. She moved them like a concert pianist or harpist, with great passion and emotion, as if playing a musical instrument! It was such a joy just to be in her presence, to hear her speak with such great passion and love of life. When you read her haiku you soon discover that her favorite themes were flowers, birds, youth and vitality, and all things pertaining to the sea. These were what she related to most in life; these were the substance of her haiku.

I'd like to give you, the readers, some idea of her richness in word choice that I spoke of earlier. The following is a list of some examples from her book *Pageant of Seasons*: dimpled waters, roiled waters, souging waters, wheeling bee, foraging bee, archaic smell, pigmy forests, oblique shadow, heaven-fenced blue, mud-plastered posters, twig cache, sunbeam-diving, sun-dried laundry, Virginia bluebells, full-blown rose, sun-baked pebbles, redwood perpendicular, gardener moonlighting, shoe-button eyes, surfboard and boy, yellow willow leaves, rolling their walnuts, vine-covered cottage, bedizened with straw and snow, in perfect V-form, and one slim pencil. Admittedly, some of her courageous experiments in word selection don't work out very well, but come on, let's all give her a break, many do! She was not insensitive to the degradation of the environment. The reader will find a few haiku on this theme in her book. It took a long while before other haiku poets followed suit. A woman definitely ahead of her times. I think that when the pendulum swings back the other way; towards lyricism and the bold use of creative phraseology, bringing haiku closer towards the emotional content often expressed in tanka, that haiku poets will go back and take a look at Helen Stiles Chenoweth's haiku. It's a good place to start! The Japanese word *sensei* means both poet and teacher. Helen Chenoweth was both. Let us learn from this pioneer!

The following are selections of her haiku from *Borrowed Water* and *Pageant of Seasons* published by Charles C. Tuttle Co. in 1966 and 1970:

**All of New England
in a jar of wild grape jelly
and a clambake**

The haiku above is probably her best-known haiku.

**In flooded rice fields
a wild mallard sits king-fashion
on a moon throne**

The phrases "sits king-fashion" and "moon throne" are difficult to match. This is the kind of poetics I find acceptable in haiku; not just acceptable, but desirable. An incredibly majestic haiku!

**A foraging bee
centered in one full-blown rose –
emerges gilded**

**Earth-moving machines
destroy vast summer orchards
night remains star-filled**

**Those grasshopper leaves
lifted and laid down by the wind –
lifted and laid down**

Dynamic! Not too many haiku poets can effectively repeat a phrase, but before you criticize her for doing so, for being "too poetic", don't forget that Basho used the same technique in his famous "Matsushima" haiku and Taigi in his lesser known "wild yellow roses" haiku.

**The mountain was lost
in that first wondrous moment
the edelweiss bloomed!**

**The thunder rumbles
but heads of ripened wheat
are one vast sheet of gold**

**These Pacific waves –
touching how many countries
and the child's feet?**

I have lived, walked, hitchhiked, and traveled up and down the Pacific Coastline from Prince Rupert, British Columbia, Canada, to Lima, Peru, for many years of my life. I am currently living in a poor tiny fishing village, Puerto Eten, in the north of Peru. I have a view of the Pacific from my balcony window. Here, as well as in the many other coastal cities, towns, and

villages in different countries, when walking along the seashore, this haiku has often come to mind as I enjoy the ocean water splashing upon my feet.

**Bedraggled scarecrow
sheltering a new laid nest
of speckled blue eggs**

**This old garden –
hearing water meet water
inhaling heliotrope**

This haiku rivals Basho's famous "old pond" haiku that ends with a splash and silence. Helen Chenoweth's haiku contains the merging of water-sounds; not just one water-sound, but three! The sound of each of the two individual rivulets of trickling water and the third sound of the new and larger combined stream! The sound of a frog leaping into a pond is one thing, but the sound of a rivulet flowing into another rivulet; this requires a very special ear, a deep awareness uncommon in Western culture. Or perhaps it was just the sound of water dripping from a faucet for the garden hose into a little pool below? It doesn't matter; the sound of "water meeting water" is music to the ears, feminine, soft and continual; whereas as the water-sound in Basho's haiku is male, abrupt and harsh, ending quickly. Her haiku is gentler than Basho's; she adds the soft feminine touch, the strong invigorating and intoxicating fragrance of heliotrope! This is a very powerful haiku! It is the modern American female version of Basho's haiku; this is what we have all been waiting for! Why hasn't anyone recognized this? Hey, we Americans have our own model to admire; we don't have to keep discussing Basho's 300 year old example in America on and on ad infinitum. Why not discuss Chenoweth's haiku creation and discuss it at length for a change? The female image of the perfumed garden versus the male image of the frog, you know, the frog that turned into a prince and vice-versa. Why do we have to keep looking outside our own culture for good examples of haiku when we have our own to praise, discuss, and analyze? Even her use of the word "this" instead of the word "the", generally used in translating the first line of Basho's haiku, gives us a more intimate sense that is lacking in Basho's example. Basho's haiku is a definite reference to the past; whereas Chenoweth's haiku refers to the past, but makes the personal connection, bringing the garden right back into the immediate present, being aware of both past and present simultaneously. Here in her garden we have the unseen movements; the three flowing waters or the two waters, one falling on top of the other, and the strong fragrance of heliotrope lingering in the garden air, and all of these enter into the poet's ear and nose orifices, filling her being, just as it has always been since the Garden of Eden, pure existence, the Paradise we all long for, and she is there!

